

N.Y. State Service Magazine Mar 1920

NEW STORIES OF LINCOLN'S BOYHOOD

Accidently discovered by a civil engineer in a trip through Arkansas where relatives of the martyr president still live

IN a remote corner of the Ozark mountains in Arkansas lives a mountain doctor, "practicing physic," whose mother, Sophie Hanks, was Abraham Lincoln's cousin and lived in the family of Thomas Lincoln, his father, in Indiana until she was married. And from this practitioner of physic and two other children of Sophie Hanks who also live in parts of the Ozark mountains has come a story of the boyhood of "Abe" Lincoln more complete and intimate than any previous one. Arthur E. Morgan, who discovered the mountaineer doctor while travelling through the Ozarks during the winter of 1908 and 1909, and who persevered until all the "Abe" lore which Sophie Hanks had handed down to her children was his own, tells the story in the February Atlantic Monthly.

In this Lincoln family were two children only, Sarah and Abraham, but orphaned or half-orphaned children from at least four other families lived there, too, and among them Sophie Hanks, whose mother was the sister of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, Abraham's mother. This sister was unmarried, and her six children all used the name Hanks as their own.

Mr. Morgan is a civil engineer and it was while he was working on a plan for the reclamation of the "Sunk Lands" of northeast Arkansas that he made a little vacation trip of exploration into the hills and came upon his treasure, buried deep. In train and then in saddle he made his way through a section of northwest Arkansas "not crossed by any railroad, where one finds canons with lichen-covered walls, steep mountainsides where cedar, oak and beech grow with a luxuriance not seen in more northern latitudes, and where the mountain scenery

will compare in beauty with anything the eastern states can offer," until he came to the little town of Jasper, the seat of Newton county, and it was in the village hotel, a residence remodelled to care for guests, that he found the doctor, husband to the landlady.

"The usual opinions to the effect that Abraham Lincoln was a sickly child," says Mr. Morgan, "do not find support in the stories handed down by the doctor's mother, who grew up with him. 'He was very firm and straight,' both physically and morally. He 'grew up very early' and was large for his years. Sophie Hanks was evidently much impressed with Abe's physical ability. 'If they was any one that was an expert at any kind of athletics,' related the doctor, 'Abe could do it better. I've heerd mother say many a time that Abe would stand flat on his feet and lean back till his head would touch the floor. I got so I could stand on a trundle bed and lean back till my head touched the bed, but I was always afraid to try it on the floor for fear I would fall and hurt myself. It was mother telling me about Abe Linkhorn that started me at it. One of my playmates got so he could stand on the flat of his feet and reach backwards and touch the ground.'

"So much for the noble example. 'He would stand on a corncob and turn enunder it.' I thought to take the opportunity to correct statements which have been written to the effect that Abe Lincoln was fond of cock-fighting; but the reply I got to my inquiry was, 'Cock-fighting was very prevalent in those days, and Abe took considerable interest in it.'

"He hunted a great deal. 'I remember mother telling about the first time he killed a turkey,' related the doctor. 'He brought

it home and told the people all evening about killing that turkey, and when he went to sleep, he talked in his sleep most of the night about that turkey. The folks devilled him in the morning for talking about the turkey in his sleep.'

"He did not use tobacco as a boy, was not profane, and did not drink whiskey, 'except as Uncle Tom would have all the children to drink a dram before breakfast for health.' John Hanks of Douglas county, Oregon, remembered the only time he saw Lincoln touch whiskey. It was at a bee-hunt. Lincoln mixed some honey and whiskey, tasted it, and said, 'Den, that tastes pretty good.' His only recorded illness was an occasional attack of malaria. The nickname, 'Honest Abe,' attached to him while he was a boy.

"Another commonly accepted belief which the doctor vigorously resented is that which holds Lincoln to have been sober and gloomy. According to the traditions of this family, he was just the reverse—bright, full of life and of fun, and very talkative. 'He was quick to learn, forgot nothing, and always wanted to tell what he knew.' The doctor repeated many times accounts of Abe's weakness for 'putting in' or interrupting a conversation when, in the relation of some incident, the truth would be departed from, or some item of the account which he considered important would be left out. 'And when the company would leave, Uncle Tom would take Abe and talk to him about "putting in" when older people were talking.' This tendency to break into a conversation was mentioned as Abe's outstanding weakness.

"He did not like girls' company, but was 'a great fellow to be with the boys.' He was known for good nature, even temper and for seldom becoming angry. He would go to all the dances in the country, but would not dance. Off at one side, with the boys gathered around him, he would tell

jokes and funny stories, and would relate what he had read. For their further edification he would turn handsprings, stand flat-footed and lean back until his head would touch the ground (this last item was many times related, and evidently formed a substantial part of the basis of the doctor's admiration for Lincoln) and would perform many other athletic stunts. Sometimes at such dances, 'it would be hard to get enough boys to stand for a set,' because Abe's company was more interesting. At wrestling, 'nobody ever throwed Abe unless he was a heap bigger than him.'

"The self-reliance so evident in later life was not absent during Lincoln's boyhood, as the following story indicates. It was at the time of Thomas Lincoln's trip down the river after the death of Lincoln's mother, and before Thomas was married the second time.

"When Uncle Tom went away, he left Abe and his sister and my mother there, and left one fat hog in the pen. It was a big, fat hog. The way she said, I guess it would weigh nigh two hundred pounds. He said that if they got out of feed, they could go over and get Mr. Greathouse to kill the hog for them. Mr. Greathouse was a neighbor and a little o' kin. When the hog was needed, Abe said they wouldn't go get Greathouse to kill the hog. He said they would kill it themselves. So Abe went over to Greathouse's when Mr. Greathouse wasn't to home, and Mrs. Greathouse let him take the gun. He must have been a little fellow, 'cause ma said, when she see him coming, the shot-pouch hung almost to his knee.'

"Abe took the gun out to the pen, and pointed it through the rails—so,—and took aim and shot the hog dead all right. And then he and my mother went into the pen and tried to take the hog out. But they couldn't budge it. So they went and got some boards and put them down in the pen,